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DEPT FOR D AND P FROM AMBASSADOR MORIARTY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/05/2018
TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR PINS KDEM ASEC BG
SUBJECT: (S) LET SHEIKH HASINA TRAVEL TO THE UNITED STATES
-- FOR NOW

REF: A. DHAKA 608 B. DHAKA 604 C. DHAKA 582

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

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¶1. (S) I feel strongly that it is in the U.S. national interest to allow former Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in to the United States for a short period of time. I understand there are serious allegations of corruption against her and her family; I believe those charges need to be investigated thoroughly (and I have pushed the Government of Singapore to speed up their own investigations into the finances of Hasina's family (Ref C)). If those investigations lead to actionable information, then we should take appropriate legal steps. In the interim, however, letting Sheikh Hasina leave the country and travel to the United States could help Bangladesh avoid a political train wreck and stay on track towards to the return of a healthier democracy. I also fear for the safety of this mission if we preemptively withdraw Hasina's visa, at a time when we are not yet able to move forward with legal action against her.

Negotiations Deadlocked

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¶2. (S) In recent weeks, Bangladesh's fragile democratic transition has been threatened by a stalemate between the government and political parties over the future status of the country's two imprisoned former Prime Ministers. The major political parties announced they would not participate in a dialogue with the government unless their leaders were released from prison; both parties threatened to boycott the upcoming December election and instead initiate protest movements to achieve their aims. In order to break the stalemate and resurrect the dialogue, the Council of Advisers (Bangladesh's civilian Caretaker Government) took the bold step of authorizing the former Prime Ministers parole and possible travel outside the country. The Advisers hope these steps will lead to a genuine dialogue with the parties and the two leaders. The Advisers view this as the best path to achieve the CTG's agenda: free, fair and credible elections in December; a safe exit for the Government and Army; and the continuation and expansion of political reforms. If adopted, the CTG's agenda would go a long way towards shaping a more sustainable democracy for Bangladesh.

Travel Plans

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¶3. (S) As reported reftels, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina would like to travel to North America to reunite with her children living in the U.S. and Canada. She is expected to arrive in Boston on June 9, and spend several weeks in the U.S. before traveling to Canada in late-June, where negotiations with GOB representatives to reach a comprehensive agreement will likely take place. If a deal

can be reached, Hasina would be expected to return to Bangladesh by the fall in order to participate in the general election campaign. For the time being, the corruption cases that have been lodged against Hasina will remain in place. As a condition of her parole, Hasina reportedly has agreed to maintain a low profile and limit her public statements. We expect that a similar process will unfold with respect to Bangladesh Nationalist Party Chairperson Khaleda Zia, but we have yet to learn the details. There is no indication that Zia or her children plan to travel to the United States.

The Downside of Revoking Hasina's Visa

¶4. (S) Revoking Hasina's visa at a time when we are not ready to move forward with legal action against her would have a destabilizing effect in Bangladesh) and substantially damage USG interests. If we revoke Hasina's visa without instituting legal action against her, most Bangladeshis will assume that we are engaged in some sort of plotting with the Caretaker Government to prevent a return to democracy. We will have to expect substantial threats against U.S. interests in the country. Such threats could well come from street action on the part of Hasina's party, the Awami League; more insidious groups could also seek to take advantage of the ill will we would generate to attack more directly U.S. interests and personnel. On the other hand, we do not anticipate any negative reaction locally to Hasina's presence in the U.S. Since the beginning of the State of Emergency, we have urged all sides to negotiate in good faith and compromise in order to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. At this point, we see no option but to support this political process and encourage the negotiators to reach a deal. (Note: If the decision is to revoke the visa, we will need ample warning to allow us to hold an Emergency Action Committee meeting and take appropriate measures to safeguard American personnel and property.)

No Get Out of Jail Free Card

¶5. (S) Bangladeshi officials have emphasized that a decision to allow Hasina and others to depart on parole does not mean that the corruption cases against them have been dropped. We understand that Bangladesh has requested assistance from the USG in pursuing possible investigations of illegal activity in the United States, and we do not believe that these efforts should cease. To deny Hasina entry into the U.S. at this point, however, would undermine our interests in Bangladesh and cripple our effectiveness. Hasina is in possession of a valid U.S. entry visa, as are those who will be accompanying her. We see no reason why she should be denied entry and urge that steps be taken in Washington to facilitate her arrival.

A Final Word

¶6. (S) The current initiative may fail, but we cannot place ourselves in a position where the USG will be blamed for its failure. The CTG is taking a risk in allowing Hasina and Zia out of prison. As we have reported previously, however, it had become increasingly difficult to see how a durable solution to the current political crisis could be reached without the consent of the two party leaders. The transition is entering a critical phase with six months to go until elections. The indications that the Council of Advisers and the Army leadership are willing to compromise are a positive sign. With no contact with the two former Prime Ministers, however, we do not yet know whether they are willing to cooperate. We need to maintain our influence with both the parties and the government; a helpful stance at this point will gain us leverage that we can use later if needed.

Moriarty